

MIDSTEOPLE QUARTER

**Response to Scottish
Government Inquiry into
Town Centres and Retail**

March 2022

About Midsteeple Quarter

Midsteeple Quarter is a Community Benefit Society, established and run by the people of Dumfries. We are pleased to have the opportunity to submit our views to the committee.

Our aim is to help shape a new future for our town centre; one that responds to the needs of our community and is run for their benefit. Our core principle is that local people have the innovative solutions for our town - and that a significant part of the answer is through community ownership.

We believe that the community having greater control over its own destiny is the best route towards sustainable prosperity that is shared fairly amongst everyone.

Midsteeple Quarter has already bought five prominent buildings in the area from where its name is taken and is working to bring them back into use - creating new business opportunities and homes.

We expect to begin work later this year on our first significant phase of construction. It will see a building transformed and extended, creating enterprise space at ground level and part of the first floor as well as seven flats on its upper floors.

The creative enterprise area will include space for pop-up projects, one-off events, long-term units for hire, a retail unit and co-working space. The homes - which will be owned by Midsteeple Quarter Community Benefit Society - will be available to rent at an affordable-to-mid-market rate.

We have already brought another formerly empty building back into full-time use, while have two others available for "meanwhile" uses while we progress our development vision.

Contact

Scott Mackay

Executive Director

E: scott@midsteeplequarter.org

M: 07985 765908

1. How are Scottish high streets and town centres changing? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Scotland's town centres?

Physical high street / town centre retail is contracting and faces challenges from online retail, out-of-town shopping centres and retail parks. High vacancy rates and buildings which have been unused for many years are suffering from lack of maintenance to such an extent that the expense of bringing them back into active use is often unviable. These buildings then become a scar on the local townscape, with obviously negative consequences. This damaging cycle needs to be - **and can be** - broken, to the benefit of people, economies and the national drive towards net-zero.

Many of our town centres benefit from their historic urban form, with heritage assets providing a living history which should make them attractive places to visit - if the assets are well maintained and used. Accessibility is a major benefit too, with most town centres being accessible by public and active transport modes, including walking and cycling. Most town centres already benefit from the principles relating to 20-minute neighbourhoods by being accessible on foot from surrounding residential areas. Huge opportunity exists in not only making residents realise this, but enhancing them to ensure they are embraced to a much greater degree.

The vacating of high streets by national chain stores - with departures accelerated by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the retail industry - provides an opportunity for new uses and new enterprises, potentially by independently-owned and locally-based new business start-ups. However, unaffordable business rates which are non-progressive are a barrier to this.

The current and evolving economics of town centres present a unique opportunity to gather prominent high street properties into community ownership and position the community to drive a more localised economic model locking inclusive prosperity into towns, enhancing town centres at a local and regional level.

This is precisely what we are working to achieve at Midsteeple Quarter in Dumfries - a High Street where local ownership thrives, ensuring the decisions taken truly have the best interests of residents at heart.

2. How do we encourage people to live in town centres? What types of policies are needed?

Significant intervention is required. This includes the use of compulsory purchase and community right to buy, as well as planning enforcement, to ensure that suitable buildings and sites are brought into responsible ownership, revived - repurposed where necessary - and brought back into positive use, addressing the need for affordable, good-quality homes in the community.

Financial incentives for repurposing unused and long-term vacant buildings are essential. These sites can be transformed into modern, welcoming, energy-efficient homes which provide more attractive places in which to live in town centres.

Better maintenance of streetscape is required and control of pests such as seagulls in some locations is required, making our town centres cleaner places in which to live and visit

Policies should also encourage a mix of uses vertically where opportunities exist in order to increase density and make use of upper floors, as is seen in communities of all sizes across Europe. In terms of creating homes, this will add a new dimension of vibrancy and pride to many communities, for people of all ages. Indeed, this is something we hope to achieve with Midsteeple Quarter's vision to create a thriving Dumfries town centre, which is home to a mix of uses, making it an attractive place in which to live and visit.

The change of use or permitted development of former retail units on ground floors to residential (as is the case in England) should not be allowed in high streets. It is our view that this will erode the stock of commercial properties and remove the activity from the heart of the town centre - reducing the potential of creating a vibrant mixed-use town centres rather than enhancing them.

Strong public transport service and active travel options are also critical in encouraging people to live in our town centres. This would reduce reliance on cars and allow people to see that they can live and work without the need for day-to-day use of their own car.

Consideration also needs to be given to the night-time economy on high streets and throughout town centres. While few would want to sleep above a noisy pub or nightclub, they also don't want to live in a virtual ghost town as soon as the shops close. We believe that policy needs to reflect the balance which needs to be struck in order to create better places in which people can live, work and enjoy their social and leisure time.

3. How can equality and diversity issues be addressed in policies that create and sustain resilient town centres?

Maximising accessibility by public and active transport modes is key to improving equality and diversity issues. Secure cycle parking and quality public toilet facilities will assist.

In order to effect a renaissance of the high street there is need for more effective community involvement – women and other marginalised identities are often active and well-represented in community groups, while they tend to be under-represented in local government, urban design and planning sectors. Giving ownership of space to community groups provides an opportunity to reset thinking and include new perspectives. It also serves to bring life to town centres and provide a greater sense of ownership of the space. The end of lockdown and the reawakening of the high street, coupled with a need to reimagine their usage, provides an opportunity to redefine space to create a sense of community ownership which can have a beneficial impact for all members of society.

Historically, Scotland's public spaces were designed predominantly to serve white, working men, while private spaces were associated with women. Women feel more at risk in environments with particular physical characteristics - dark, isolated, remote, unpopulated, or spots with obstructed visibility - and consequently avoid spaces with those characteristics. Adding to the challenge, typical design features intended to improve safety and prevent crime can be counter-productive when it comes to improving the perception of safety. For example, designs enhancing lighting often introduce bright floodlights that also create pockets of darkness. Symbolic barriers such as hedges and walls may deter intruders from a property, but they also limit visibility and offer hiding places. These design choices can deter women from using public spaces.

The UK Government acknowledges that there is a problem around how women currently interact with the public realm. In its recently published Build Back Better – High Streets Strategy it was announced that the third round of Safer Streets Funding aims to increase and improve the safety of public spaces for all, with a focus on improving the safety of women and girls and improving women and girls' "feeling of safety" in these spaces.

In terms of supporting people with disabilities, issues surrounding accessibility are critical, with the experience of our members highlighting the fact that the views of those most directly affected needed to be taken more directly into consideration.

Despite continued work around accessibility over many years, access to shops and pavements remains a significant issue which needs to be overcome. There is a need for more lowered pavements to ease the anxieties of wheelchair users who often have to carefully plan their journeys in advance to avoid obstacles. Measures should be taken to stop cars parking in front of lowered pavements.

Building modifications should also have accessibility to the fore - not just in terms of reaching upper floors, but in ensuring doors are wide enough to allow access to all types of wheelchairs and that products are displayed appropriately to ensure parts of retail units are not cut off to those with mobility issues.

4. Independent and small businesses, and community and co-operative operations enhance local resilience and wellbeing but can often be marginalised in town centres. How can this be changed?

As a community benefit society itself, one of Midsteeple Quarter's purposes is to provide a platform from which independent and small businesses - along with local co-operatives and other community organisations - can thrive. We believe passionately in the fact that more locally-owned and operated businesses are key to the resilience and sustainability of our town centres.

A critical way in which we can ensure these enterprises are not marginalised is by building community capacity through investing in community enterprises and providing skills support via enterprise agencies. Greater support is required to develop local social enterprise networks to harness their knowledge in order to develop an action plan that works for their community.

Both the businesses and the public sector tend to have a lack of understanding and knowledge about what SEs and co-operatives are and how they operate. It is our view that support should be provided to meet core costs where there is a focus on moving towards sustainability.

Co-ops and communities often go where the private sector fears to tread, but seldom get a similar level of return for working in high-risk sectors. Support needs to look at levelling the playing field. National government could provide that support, a move which we are sure would pay for itself many times over in terms of local economic activity, sustainability and success.

Beyond this, sliding scales for business rates and more availability of short-term leases would support fledgling independent businesses, especially those without significant upfront capital, to set them on a positive path.

5. What is the role of culture and leisure in town centres? How can these be leveraged to increase wellbeing?

It is clear that successful town centres of the future will be those which successfully diversify away from a dependence upon Class 1 retail.

A mix of culture and leisure uses in high streets will provide a more diverse and resilient customer base, giving people a greater number of reasons for which to visit and perhaps stay for longer, whether that be to enjoy visitor attractions located in town centres, the hospitality industry - or both.

Culture and leisure have a major part to play in developing the mixed use that is so crucial to creating a better future, one which improves the lives and wellbeing of people on a personal level - providing them with greater numbers of opportunities - but also collectively for the wellbeing of the community.

Town centres should be places where creativity can thrive. At Midsteeple Quarter, we have a proud history of working with artists to create chances that better our community. And it is our view that the commercial, creative and community sectors should be encouraged to work hand-in-hand, wherever possible, to create better town centres.

6. Who or what can drive change in Scottish town centres?

Collaboration is key. Change can only be driven through national policies which create and encourage opportunities for sustainable developments, a just transition and the growth of community wealth. A fairer, more favourable tax system also has the potential to unlock significant change.

At grassroots level, positive evolution is dependent on local Authorities working in partnership with local businesses, community groups and social enterprises. Change will only be achieved through organisations with the interests of their communities at their core working to a common purpose, with clear direction.

7. Can you provide examples of best practice and success stories, in the UK and/or internationally, of creating living and resilient town centres?

Midsteeple Quarter, Dumfries, has a masterplan for a mix of residential, leisure, retail and cultural uses within a concentrated area of the high street. It has been successful to date in obtaining funding, acquiring property and enabling new uses. Once completed, the project will create more than 60 new homes and 50 new commercial spaces in a new neighbourhood, sheltered within a town block, which will become home to in the region of 200 people. This will be a vibrant and sustainable quarter with a new and resilient approach to town centre development that is diverse, adaptable and driven by community needs, aspiration and enterprise. It will recognise and respect the environment. It profiles the importance of Scotland's towns and places.

By providing new commercial spaces for micro-enterprise in the centre of Dumfries, MSQ will assist its stakeholders to create 25 new start-ups and assist 25 other businesses to become more productive, creating and retaining 75 FTE jobs in the town centre. These jobs are forecast to deliver a GVA of £37,000 per FTE per year, twice the average for Dumfries and Galloway as a whole, reflecting a national trend for the productivity of urban against rural jobs. These benefits also sit across different spatial levels; there is a significant local impact and the benefits will be felt through the region.

Ultimately, these will contribute to the wider performance and success of Scotland, giving opportunities for individuals to grow and learn, while creating a supportive environment for businesses across the region and beyond, servicing many of Scotland's key sectors.

Midsteeple Quarter is delivering this vision in a way that is sympathetic to the climate and the environment. By creating a mixed use, multi-generational neighbourhood, the project makes best use of existing infrastructure, bringing people closer to services and facilities. New and refurbished buildings will bring sustainable construction and energy efficiency to the Midsteeple Quarter, integrated town centre living will reduce private car dependency. An aspiration for the project is to examine the potential for geothermal energy in the supply of district heating.

8. If not covered elsewhere, what other policy interventions would you like to see to create living and resilient town centres?

The removal of VAT on refurbishment works on existing buildings would be a significant help in creating stronger town centres, by easing some of the pressure which exists on bringing vacant and disused buildings back to life – although we appreciate this is not a devolved issue.

Improvements in place and perception of place in town centres have been extensively researched and demonstrated to deliver increases in footfall, reversing the trend for falling footfall and declining prosperity on the high street. Improved urban places have been demonstrated to deliver economic 'place value'. There is a clear link from the evidence on place value to the sorts of qualities that enhance or detract from that.

For more information about Midsteeples Quarter's work, please go to www.midsteeplesquarter.org